

DEPLORATIONS

COETZEE, COSTELLO AND DOUBLING THE N

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... although the houses founded in temperate zones have generally been a success, the Cistercian Rule has never been properly lived in the tropics. So many mitigations are required that the life is unrecognisable. The monks of Leopoldville in the Belgian Congo, Beagle Bay in northern Australia, and the monks of Brazil rapidly lost their true Cistercian character. The climate had simply twisted their Rule out of shape. For that matter, it is easy to see how poorly the Rule of St Benedict is adapted to the Southern Hemisphere, where everything, as they say, is upside down. Since the seasons are reversed, Lent falls in harvest time, and the monks have to fast when they need to eat; then, in compensation, they have plenty to eat when they could easily fast. (Merton 1962)

Postcoloniality is the condition of what we might ungenerously call a comprador intelligentsia: a relatively small, Western-style, Western trained group of writers and thinkers, who mediate the trade in cultural commodities of world capitalism at the periphery. In the West they are known through the Africa they offer; their compatriots know them both through the West they present to Africa and through the Africa they have invented for the world, for each other, and for Africa. (Appiah 1996)

"One of the more startling disjunctures between text and referent in recent South African writing occurs at the moment when Sister Bridget, 'sister by blood' (2003:124) to J.M. Coetzee's eponymous protagonist in *Elizabeth Costello* and Administrator of the Hospital of the Blessed Mary on the Hill, Marianhill, dismisses Elizabeth's suggestion of a 'Greek' model for art and life in Africa. Pointing out that this is just what had occurred to the early colonialists—'educated Europeans, men from England with public-school educations behind them' (2003:140)—when they first came in contact with the Zulus, Sister Bridget declares, "Well, the Zulus knew better." She waves a hand towards the window,' we are then told, 'towards the hospital

buildings baking under the sun, towards the dirt road winding into the barren hills', and continues: "'This is reality: the reality of Zululand, the reality of Africa. It is the reality now and the reality of the future as far as we can see it'" (2003:141).

"What is startling about Sister Bridget's gesture is that the landscape outside the windows of Mariannhill—for Coetzee's 'Marianhill' cannot help but allude to this actual site—differs significantly from the one described here. The hospital is there, and the hills too, but the hills around Mariannhill are anything but 'barren'. Covered now with informal housing rapidly being transformed into a low-cost formal housing estate, they are set off still by the remainder of the intensely cultivated land for which the monastery that gives Mariannhill its name was famous from its earliest days. The monastery was renowned too for its expertly constructed roads and bridges, far better built than those of the colony of Natal in general at the time of its founding, and their contemporary legacy is the tarred, busy, multi-laned M1, which can scarcely be described as 'winding' as it cuts its brutal way between the industrial parks which have sprung up around Mariannhill and the predominantly black residential areas formed as locations for labour during the apartheid years.

"Now the point I wish to make in noting this is not one of simple counterfactualisation. *Elizabeth Costello* is a work of fiction, perhaps even a novel. It has, at least, a fictional protagonist, and the settings of the 'Eight Lessons' into which her experiences are divided are presented in modes that vary from what the implied author—who appears only in 'Lesson 1: Realism'¹—calls 'moderate realism' ('supply the particulars, allow the significations to emerge of themselves' (2003:4)) to a (internally contested) 'tissue of allegory' (196). In this context, Coetzee's misspelling of 'Marianhill'—one 'n' instead of two—can be read as a clear signal that he claims for *Elizabeth Costello* what Nathaniel Hawthorne, in defending *The House of the Seven Gables* as 'A Romance', called 'a certain latitude' (1851:ii) from the mimetic fidelity expected of a novel.² This allows us to note the missing 'n' in the name Coetzee invokes for his fictional 'mission station' in terms of appropriate seriousness, central in fact to the mode in which Coetzee works, rather than as a simple spelling mistake, 'checkable by history (as a child's schoolwork is checked by a schoolmistress)' (1988:3).³

"In the same vein we could account, too, for the blatant inaccuracies in the way in which the mission hospital is positioned geographically: Mariannhill—two n's—is not, as described, 'in rural Zululand' (2003:116) at all, but firmly positioned within the province of KwaZulu-Natal, with the

rapidly expanding light-industrial centre of Pinetown now pressing right up against it. Far from being in 'the sticks in Zululand' (124), it is just 23 kilometres from the centre of Durban and 63 from Pietermaritzburg. The hospital (in actuality St Mary's Hospital) is the only Level One District hospital attending to public sector patients between these two major metropolitan centres, and serves a community of over seven hundred and fifty thousand people.

"Dedicated as it is to the healthcare needs of the 'poorest of the poor',⁴ most of the fifteen thousand patients treated at St Mary's annually come from peri-urban, even rural areas, and so—to continue with our rather pedantic checking—we could concede something to Coetzee as far as the 'rural' nature of his setting is concerned. Seventy-five percent of the hospital's patients are women and children, putting it at the forefront of the fight against HIV/AIDS, and so the latitude Coetzee claims in having Sister Bridget concentrate the energies of the hospital 'more and more on the plight of children born infected' (116) is also not that far off the mark. We could complain, however, that Sister Bridget's 'great innovation' of having 'native doctors'—'traditional healers', that is—'work besides doctors of Western medicine' (134) is a lot further from the mark. Apart from a rather tentative and not particularly successful invitation put out to traditional healers in the early 1990s, St Mary's has not experimented much in this direction. Eighty percent of the hospital's operational funding is obtained from the Department of Health, and so its administrators are careful to follow the guidelines and protocols for dealing with HIV/AIDS set by the province of KwaZulu-Natal.⁵ Historically, too, Mariannhill saw itself as engaged in a long and 'single-handed fight with the dark powers of witchcraft' (1950:76), as Francis Schimlek put it in his book, published by the Mariannhill Mission Press, *Medicine Versus Witchcraft*. But the point I wish to make is that none of the fictionalising freedom Coetzee takes with these details has the same scandalising effect as Sister Bridget's wave at the hills that serve to locate her.

"Why is this? Why indeed should any of the localising details concerning the institution touched on so far be in the least pertinent if we accord fiction in general its usual conventions, let alone the kind of ludic and elliptical work for which Coetzee has been so celebrated?

"Perhaps this is the moment to speak to the title of my talk today. It is taken, quite appropriately I think for so Catholic a project, from an apocryphal Costello story. Published in the *New York Review of Books* the year after the appearance of *Elizabeth Costello*, 'As a Woman Grows Older' makes up for the lapse Adam Mars-Jones notes with disapproval

in his review of the novel—'It's announced that Elizabeth plans to visit her daughter in Nice after a conference, but the visit isn't referred to again' (2003)—and one is forced to wonder if its belated appearance doesn't signal the possibility of an actual forthcoming publication entitled *'The Opinions of Elizabeth Costello, revised edition'*.

"(I might add as an aside that I once asked Professor Coetzee, after he had given one of Costello's early and yet-to-be-published Lessons at a conference in Krakow in 2001, if Elizabeth Costello was building up to something bigger. His reply was that she was running out of steam.)

"In any event, it is in this supplementary story that I find a word that some may (or is that 'might', Elizabeth?) apply to Sister Bridget's gesture. "*Deplore*," says Costello to John, her 'good and dutiful son':

'a word one does not hear much nowadays. No one with any sense *deplores*, not unless they want to be a figure of fun. An interdicted word, an interdicted activity. So what is one to do? Does one keep them all pent up, one's deplorations...? I deplore what the world is coming to. I deplore the course of history. From my heart I deplore it.... But the detail, John, the detail! It is not just the grand sweep of history that I deplore, it is the detail.... It is details ... that exasperate me....' (15)

"Indeed. And it is the detail, not the grand sweep of Sister Bridget's argument through the history of the humanities, that prevents some of us (fortunately not nearly enough of us to worry Secker & Warburg's offices in London and New York, not even those in Sydney and Auckland) from being able to take the wave of her hand lightly.

"It is a simple fact, difficult to accord any weight I know in a realm of discourse dedicated to interrogating anything like 'a simple fact', that it is impossible for anyone even vaguely familiar with Mariannhill—yes, with two n's—not to see Sister Bridget's appeal to reality (an appeal upon which her entire argument rests) as little short of—well, 'amusing' is, I am afraid, the word that comes to mind. Put bluntly, the mismatch between her appeal and the details of its—yes, I will claim this, knowing just how naïve it must sound—"extratextual" referent (for so it is claimed to be, even within the text of the fiction) is too obvious to be treated as ironic, even if the text did point us this way (which it doesn't). It can only come across, for those acquainted with the hills of Mariannhill, as, quite simply, *wrong*—and the implied author's clear lack of awareness of this is what gives the moment its comic effect. For in the very instant that Sister Bridget invokes a physical setting in support of her position—let me quote again the point that carries the day for her in her argument with her sister so that it is fresh

in our minds: "'This is *reality*: the *reality* of Zululand, the *reality* of Africa. It is the *reality* now and the *reality* of the future as far as we can see it'"—what is actually conjured up for certain readers is a demonstrable unreality, a non-reality, if you will, that is not even a meaningful counter-reality. What used to be called, no less, a howler.

"And so, what do we have here? A little in-joke for pedants of the particular, a rather crass giggle that can all too easily be turned back on the lack of sophistication amongst the locals? A minor point of relevance only to a minuscule audience? To be met by a mildly irritated shrug from the author's representatives (for we know from the long history of his notorious reticence that he will not respond himself to any point concerning his writing) who will no doubt say that he could have called his—and who else's is it, finally?—hospital on its mission station 'in the sticks' (even this local colloquialism is put into the mouth of a character, after all) anything he liked? Take away not just the 'n' but the whole name, pick any other entirely invented appellation, make sure only to distance the signifier from (the idea of) the signified—would this change the Lesson in any particular way?

"But Coetzee *did* choose to load the name of his hospital with the overtones of Mariannhill, and we must pause for a moment to ask why. Certainly the nature of the argument given to Sister Bridget relies, as I have said, on the grounding of her ideas in a specific location, just as her sister Elizabeth's 'Lesson'—"the humanities teach us humanity" (151)—needs to be accompanied by the story of its being acted out in its more individualised Australian setting. The hills of 'Marianhill', then, take on the fictional version of the specific and the actual, that is, they are intended as contributions towards the verisimilitude many reviewers find all too thin in this 'novel of ideas'. (In this case I suppose we could, if we wished, put down the blatant inaccuracy the name conjures up instead to Coetzee's characterisation of his younger self, 'All his life he has lacked interest in his environment, physical or social. He lives wherever he finds himself, turned inward' (1998:393).)

"At another level, the use of the name and setting of 'Marianhill' could be taken as an example of the way in which Coetzee's 'postmodern' fictional strategies must be understood, as David Attwell has argued, 'in the light of his postcoloniality' (1993:20). Attwell was taking on the full blast of the early Leftist charges of 'philosophical idealism' levelled at Coetzee when he made this argument, and so the problem, as he says, 'can be defined sharply: is the turn towards textuality in Coetzee a turning away from history?' (17). His answer to this: '*situational metafiction*' (2003:3,

my emphasis)—‘a mode of fiction that draws attention to the historicity of discourses, to the way subjects are positioned within and by them, and, finally, to the interpretive process, with its acts of contestation and appropriation’ (1993:20). This is well put, but Attwell also characterises the problem as ‘primarily ... a question of *reference*’ (17, his emphasis), and we must ask ourselves on this occasion what the implications are for a reference made in a work of fiction—however much it is ‘split’, or ‘cleft’, or ‘suspended’ (17–18), however much we recognise the work of fiction to be the very condition for the gesture of referentiality—when the thing to which it refers resists, refuses, denies that gesture.

“‘Kafka’s ape is embedded in life. It is the embeddedness that is important, not the life,’ (2003:32) Elizabeth says to the long-suffering John. Is it worth noting at this point that this is, too, Coetzee’s own first name? Perhaps so, if we may take a chance on the identity of the implied author of Lesson 1, whose longest appearance is devoted to the conviction that for Realism, ‘the notion of *embodying* turns out to be pivotal’:

Realism has never been comfortable with ideas. It could not be otherwise: realism is premised on the idea that ideas have no autonomous existence, can exist only in things. So when it needs to debate ideas, as here, realism is driven to invent situations—walks in the countryside, conversations—in which characters give voice to contending ideas and thereby in a certain sense embody them. (9)

“It is precisely the emergence of the ‘author’ meditating on the very form ‘he’ is using that, of course, in a fine twist distances *Elizabeth Costello* from the realm of realism. But neither this twist, nor the twist that Sister Bridget’s argument is, finally, not proven conclusively by her appeal to the real, does away with the unfortunate effect that one of the elements crucial to the ‘embedding’ and ‘embodying’ of Lesson 5 has at just the precise moment when the invocation of the specific really matters.

“In none of the other Lessons does the local impinge in any serious sense, so much so that the work as a whole takes on something of the air of Costello’s aspirations as a novelist. This is best caught in the moment when John tells the chairman of the jury that “‘his mother will be disappointed ... if she learns that the Stowe Award is hers only because 1995 has been decreed to be the year of Australia’”. She wants to be “‘the best’”, he says, “‘not the best Australian, not the best Australian woman, just the best’” (8).

“‘Lectures often begin with light-hearted remarks whose purpose is to set the audience at ease,’ says Costello in her lecture in Part One of ‘Lesson

3: The Lives of Animals’ (62) just before—of course—making certain no one in the audience will take her opening remarks in that way.

“I must apologise for neglecting this convention of public speech myself, but let me perhaps make up for it now by saying that it is possible that Coetzee, to the degree that he shares Costello’s opinions, must have been equally disappointed to find himself called, on the dust jacket of *Elizabeth Costello*, only ‘One of the best novelists alive’.

“Thank you, thank you....

“But we must for the moment take Costello’s dislike of being evaluated within so circumscribed a list of possible candidates seriously. John too is concerned ‘that his mother not be treated as a Mickey Mouse postcolonial writer’ (9). The Disneyland image has a lot to say about where the interest in the literary turn of the ‘post-colonial’ is really centred. But it is another issue to do with the national and the postcolonial that interests me here. Coetzee, strongly associated as he is with things South African despite or perhaps because of his parodic, allegorical, and pre-emptive interrogation of them, compounds the problems of his status as a postcolonial writer by recasting his own concerns—via Costello—as those of a writer who is Australian ‘by birth’ (1). I will not be so crude as to comment in any way on Coetzee’s literal translation of himself to Australia, but the suggestion that these concerns remain the same be they those of an Australian, a South African, or, by implication, a writer from any of the multiple conditions that may be described primarily in terms of their experience of colonialism, could be seen as troubling at a time when there is a renewed interest in the specificities of postcolonial literary practices.

“Certainly Coetzee’s ‘postcolonialism’ is not of what Biodun Jeyifo calls the ‘normative and proleptic’ type (1990:53); that is to say, he is quite obviously not a writer or, for that matter, a critic, ‘who speaks to, or for, or in the name of a post-independent nation-state’. The very thought of any such will-to-identity in his work is negated by the force with which he inhabits the second kind of postcoloniality identified by Jeyifo, that is the ‘interstitial or liminal’: ‘an ambivalent mode of self-fashioning of the writer or critic which is neither First World nor Third World, neither securely and smugly metropolitan, nor assertively and combatively Third-worldist. The very terms which express the orientation of this school of postcolonial self-representation are revealing: diasporic, exilic, hybrid, in-between, cosmopolitan,’ says Jeyifo (53), who names Coetzee specifically as one of its paradigmatic figures.

“One can well imagine how much Coetzee would deplore being assigned

to any school, but some of the terms Jeyifo lists here could be applied to Elizabeth Costello—could be, that is, until they are rarefied beyond even the international wanderings that form the settings for the earlier lessons and we are carried finally into a realm where ‘All is allegory’ (2003:229): a realm from which Elizabeth, Lady Chandos (who signs herself ‘Elizabeth C.’), begs in her letter to Francis Bacon to be rescued. Much of Elizabeth’s failing power in ‘Lesson 8: At the Gate’ is spent in trying to prevent her judges from turning all she says into allegory. After recalling the ‘death’ and ‘rebirth’ of the frogs in the mud of the Dulgannon river—‘I am speaking now of one river in particular now,’ she reminds them—she insists that ‘the life cycle of the frog may sound allegorical, but to the frogs themselves it is no allegory, it is the thing itself, the only thing’ (217). She is forced, despite this, to leave open the option that, as one of her judges puts it, “these Australian frogs ... embody the spirit of life”—even as she cries out within herself, ‘*I am worth better than that*’” (218-9). To her own surprise, however, imagined densely and sympathetically, the coming back to life of the frogs does become something ‘that she can believe in’—‘she can believe in that,’ she says, ‘if she concentrates closely enough, word by word’ (220). For here the frogs of the river Dulgannon take on the ‘different kind of being-in-the-world’ Costello says Ted Hughes is feeling towards in his Jaguar poems:

‘in these poems we know the jaguar not from the way he seems but from the way he moves. The body is as the body moves, or as the currents of life move within it. The poems ask us to imagine our way into that way of moving, to inhabit that body.

‘With Hughes it is a matter—I emphasize—not of inhabiting another mind but of inhabiting another body. (95-6)

“A strange point to lie at the centre of Coetzee’s most—fictionally speaking—disembodied, disembedded work. For all his emphasis on Costello’s ageing body, each of the Lessons has an air of the lost physicality of her three nights in a row with Emmanuel Egudu; his voice, it turns out in the sting in the tale of ‘Lesson 2’, once made her shudder too, throwing doubt back across her rejection of ‘The Novel in Africa’ as ‘an oral novel, a novel that has kept touch with the human voice and hence with the human body, a novel that is not disembodied like the Western novel but speaks the body and the body’s truth...’ (53). All Elizabeth has now, however, to protect her from the ‘contagion’ of ‘saying one thing always for another’ (228), from yielding in her exhaustion ‘to the figures’ (229), is her frogs, ‘Because they exist,’ she says—‘the Dulgannon and its

mudflats are real, the frogs are real. They exist whether or not I tell you about them, whether or not I believe in them... it is because of their indifference to me that I believe in them’ (217).

“One cannot but be struck by this appeal to the real—the Dulgannon, she insists, ‘is not negligible. You will find it on most maps’ (218)—and Sister Bridget’s wave. I am not qualified to say if a similar kind of referential disjuncture comes into play at this point but, either way, we are put into the position of having to query the *national* contexts of these two very specific appeals to reality.

“In a way, ‘The Humanities in Africa’, split as it is specifically between South Africa and Australia, stages just such a query, as much in its various versions as in the playoff of Marianhill and Melbourne that characterises what we must assume is the finalised form in *Elizabeth Costello*. Like most of the other Lessons, ‘The Humanities in Africa’ has appeared in print before. In this case, however, the text itself has differed quite drastically in its three different outings, although it must be said that ‘Marianhill’ remains consistent—consistently ‘wrong’, that is—through all three, from its parallel German/English text in *The Humanities in Africa/Die Geisteswissenschaften in Afrika* to its remarkable inclusion in *The Best Australian Stories 2002* (few South Africans, indeed, and not many Australians, were ready for this), to the combination of these two versions in ‘Lesson 5’ of *Elizabeth Costello*. It is the Australian version which should teach us the most about being wary of pinning ‘The Humanities in Africa’ to Africa, south or otherwise: not because of its more heavily accented Australianness, in which Sister Bridget’s lecture disappears to be displaced by Elizabeth Costello’s more sexually intimate performance of the meaning of ‘humanity’ upon the voiceless, dying body of Mr Phillips in a Melbourne ‘old folks’ home’ (151), but because of the lesson the collection of stories itself has for African writers.

“‘The whole volume,’ writes Margaret Lenta in ‘Reading Australia’, ‘is evidence [that] Australians, unlike ourselves, feel entitled to be interested in anything, anywhere’ (2003:n.p.). Thus, whilst ‘Australia itself is not neglected’, ‘there are stories dealing with sexual confidences on a French beach, a chilly Easter on an English canal, an unspecified location where werewolves interact with men’—all of which demonstrate Costello’s argument in ‘Lesson 2: The Novel in Africa’, that what African writers can learn from Australian writers is to get out ‘of the habit of writing for strangers’ (51), something Australian writers were able to learn how to do ‘when our market, our Australian market, decided that it could support a home-grown literature’ (52). It is precisely the maturity of a national market

that allows a writer, in Costello's view, to go on to international—no, something beyond that, not just international greatness, but greatness, pure and simple and unspecified. For the African writer, however, says Elizabeth, the question still is, 'Why are there so many African novelists around and yet no African novel worth speaking of?' (50). And the answer? 'Exoticism. Exoticism and its seductions' (51).

"This point, properly explained, silences even Egudu, but it also prompts us to ask, cautiously, a further question: given the kind of emptying of its local significance that Mariannhill undergoes in 'The Humanities in Africa', what role other than an 'exotic' role could 'Mariannhill' be identified as playing in its fictionalisation? I return again to the fact that Coetzee *did* choose to name his hospital after Mariannhill, but is he in this simply 'performing his Africanness'? Providing some local colour? And this not very successfully, in the case of Sister Bridget's wave, which, as I have said, disqualifies some of us, purely on the basis of our local knowledge, from participating in the willing suspension required by the 'universalising' of fiction.

"Now it may be said—and I am sure this has occurred to you pretty forcefully by now—that I am hanging far too much on one momentarily uplifted hand. Let me go on to say, then, that while it is not inimical to Coetzee's fictional project to anything like the same degree, the point we are dealing with now does require us to note that Mariannhill can only serve its purpose in the fiction by a similar, although more conventionally acceptable, distancing from anything like its historical reality. By this I mean, following Costello, its ability to 'exist whether or not I tell you about [it], whether or not I believe in [it]'. Drained of all local particulars, geographic and historic (I shall return to the latter shortly), does Mariannhill not become little more than a seductive setting for an argument that—despite Sister Bridget's gesture, or rather because of it, and its failure to connect a specific reality to a general argument—remains entirely in the realm of ideas: ideas that are given little purchase on their setting or, more importantly, marked by the refusal of their referent to be appropriated within those ideas?

"Now I must make it clear that I am not, in asking this, attempting to reinstate what Coetzee once called the 'the appropriating appetite of the discourse of history' or 'the colonisation of the novel by the discourse of history' (1988:2). I am encouraged, rather, in this line of thought by Costello's response in Part Two of 'The Lives of Animals' to a question from the floor concerning Swift which I think we may lift from its place in her larger argument without losing its force. First, Costello gives a counter

reading to *A Modest Proposal* that suggests that Swift may be being more literal than is generally accepted; this she concludes with the words, 'If you want Swift to be a dark ironist rather than a facile pamphleteer, you might examine the premises that make his fable so easy to digest' (2003:101). Here, again, we run into *Elizabeth Costello*/Elizabeth Costello's almost obsessive concern with the collapsing back of what the fiction has established as 'real' into parable or fable or allegory, figures in fact of any kind.

"When she turns to Gulliver, Elizabeth modulates this concern—which is, as we have seen, ultimately a concern of one kind or another with the referent—more explicitly into the historical, more specifically the colonial historical: 'What has always puzzled me about *Gulliver's Travels*,' she says,

'and this is a perspective you might expect from an ex-colonial – is that Gulliver always travels alone. Gulliver goes on voyages of exploration to unknown lands, but he does not come ashore with an armed party, as happened in reality, and Swift's book says nothing about what would normally have come after Gulliver's pioneering efforts: follow-up expeditions, expeditions to colonize Lilliput or the island of the Houyhnhnms.

'The question I ask is: What if Gulliver and an armed expedition were to land, shoot a few Yahoos when they became threatening, and then shoot and eat a horse for food? What would that do to Swift's somewhat too neat, somewhat too disembodied, somewhat too unhistorical fable?' (102, original emphasis)

"What indeed? And what would the equivalent effect be of playing off something of what *happened* to Mariannhill in reality against Coetzee's (forgive me) "'somewhat too neat, somewhat too disembodied, somewhat too unhistorical fable'"? What would happen to the fictionalisation of Mariannhill if our concern was, as it is for Sister Bridget in her lecture on the humanities in Africa, 'to be historically accurate'? (120).

"The conventions of presenting a paper—to say nothing of my own poor powers—preclude me from achieving anything like this effect, but let us at least note that the subject of the address Sister Bridget gives on the occasion of having an honorary degree conferred upon her for her work at *Mariannhill*—the betrayal of the humanities by secular rationality—does not tie in with the fervently-fought internal battles (of which St Mary's hospital itself is a contested result) that historically tore *Mariannhill* apart. That history is silenced by the present that Coetzee creates, and

while there can be no requirement that Coetzee does anything other than what he has done, one can lament the loss incurred, the potential undone.

"I say a history that is silenced, and that brings me to the first of the ways in which Mariannhill could have spoken back to—well, to whom, exactly? The fictional author, the implied author, someone identified in the world as 'J.M. Coetzee'? Perhaps 'to what?' is the better question—the ways in which Mariannhill could have spoken back to the fictional effect of 'The Humanities in Africa'.

"Founded in 1880, Mariannhill was originally a Cistercian house, more specifically the Cistercians of the Strict Observance, or, as they are popularly known, the Trappists. Now the Trappist Order is a contemplative Order. The contemplative life, as set out in the Rule of St Benedict, involves withdrawal from the world, solitude, prayer, fasting, manual work and, above all, silence. Even standing together uselessly is considered a breach of silence. The recitation of the Divine Office ranks first amongst the duties of the monks; beginning just after midnight, this takes up seven hours a day. A strict vegetarian diet is followed—as a penance, not because eating meat is considered wrong in itself—and extensive periods of fasting. The daily timetable set for the monks organises the use of every minute, and every aspect of their lives is carefully regulated by the one thousand eight hundred and two paragraphs of the Order's *Regulations*. These set out the prescribed behaviour for every likely occurrence in monastic life, holding at bay all unnecessary cares and disturbing influences so that neither anxiety nor insecurity can interfere with striving towards a state of constant union with God.

"Trappists are not unconcerned with the spreading of God's word, of course, but their Constitutions and Statutes forbid missionary activity. As Constitution 31 puts it, 'it is the contemplative life itself that is their way of participating in the mission of Christ and his Church'; therefore 'they cannot be called upon to render assistance in the various pastoral ministries or in any external activity, no matter how urgent the needs of the active apostolate'. But if the Trappist life is strictly a contemplative one, what was a branch of the Order doing landing on the south-eastern coast of Africa in 1878? Bishop Ricards of Port Elizabeth had decided that the silent example of the Trappists would succeed where conventional missionaries, Catholics and Protestants alike, had so remarkably failed in his Vicariate. Being Irish himself, he attempted without success to recruit Irish Trappists for his project, and it was the Austrian Franz Pfanner who finally brought a small band of monks to Dunbrody, the site Ricards had chosen for them. To this day, both the monks and nuns associated with

Mariannhill are almost exclusively of Austrian or east European extraction, and so while Sister Bridget's Irishness—emphasised by her religious name's heavy Irish associations—would have warmed Bishop Ricard's heart, it is a distinct anachronism within the context of Mariannhill.

"In any event, Pfanner fell out repeatedly with Ricards, and left the Eastern Cape in 1880 to found Mariannhill in Natal. Various accounts are given for the choice of this name, ranging from the Cistercian tradition of dedicating their monasteries to Mary to the fact that by a strange coincidence Maria Anna had been the name of both Pfanner's mother, who died in childbirth, and his beloved stepmother. To this we may add that Pfanner had been a deeply controversial figure at Maria Wald, the monastery near Cologne where he had become a Trappist, and he spent increasing amounts of time alone outside the cloister in the hills that sheltered the monastery—the Marianne Hills. His choice of name then for his new foundation was intended, I believe, to express something of his own peculiar take on the strict observances of the Trappists, and any alteration to that name risks missing this point.

"At first his monastery flourished, with its farms, roads, and buildings soon taking on the features of a small town. We should note that the complex did not include a hospital as such, however, as Franz was a staunch follower of the water cures popular in Germany and would have nothing to do with 'English doctors ... and alopahy with expensive and poisonous medicines' (Roos 1983:70).

"In 1885 Mariannhill was elevated to the status of an Abbey (with Pfanner as its first Abbot), and by 1887 its success was such that it 'had become numerically the largest abbey in the world' (Brain 1975:173). This numerical success was, however, a result of the monks being drawn ever-increasingly into the active apostolate. It began with their giving in to requests by native chiefs for schools for their children (occasionally allowed within the Trappist Order), and soon developed into wholesale missionary work. Even though Pfanner tried to keep within the spirit of the Cistercian Order by avoiding hasty evangelism in favour of the natives coming of their own accord to the impressive monastic estates, the contemplative life was under serious threat at Mariannhill.

"This was not helped by Pfanner's taking to the medium of print in order, initially, to win support and alms for his work. His letters and articles were soon a regular feature in even the secular press of Natal, so much so that one editorial in the *Natal Mercury* began, 'The Abbot of Mariannhill, though a devout Trappist, cannot be said to exemplify the rule of silence imposed upon the brethren of his Order. In the Press, at any rate, he is one

of the most communicative of men. He is ready at all times for a joust in the arena of controversy' (September 19, 1889).

"Pfanner's work expanded along with his reputation. A vast network of stations was developed, stretching up to the Drakensberg and then around the southern tip of the colony of Natal and into East Griqualand. In order for these stations to operate as missions, however, more and more dispensations from the Rule of St Benedict and the Regulations of the Order had to be given. As one of the more astute historians of Mariannhill puts it,

Solitude and withdrawal from the world are opposed to the needs of a missionary. A missionary locked up in his enclosure cannot fulfil his duties even though he may pray and sing psalms all day long. A missionary must go out. The task imposed upon him by his Master is to teach, to baptise, and to go after erring sheep. Silence falls away by itself. (Roos 1983:11)

"Such activity caused tension and hostility between those monks who wished to remain within the 'regular' religious life of a Trappist and those who had given themselves over to the freer life of the missionary. One way in which Pfanner attempted to alleviate this was by asking for an Order of Sisters who could take over most of the active mission work. When this was refused, he formed his own association of women helpers. He organised them along lines so close to those of a religious Congregation that it was not long before they were formally accepted as such. And so the Sisters of the Precious Blood—Coetzee's 'Sisters of the Marion Order'—came into being. In their fictionalisation, however, what is lost is the desperate fight Pfanner had to put up to prevent them being turned into Trappistines, as limited in their access to missionary work as his own monks were meant to be. The addition of the word 'Missionary' to their name when they became an independent congregation in 1906 is a direct result of this struggle.⁶

"The conflict between contemplatives and missionaries was brought to a head during the Canonical Visitation of 1892. The report of the Visitor led ultimately to Pfanner's deposition. He retired to one of the most distant of the stations he had established (although he never ceased to involve himself in the affairs of Mariannhill, even under the most severe proscriptions) and years of unsuccessful attempts by a number of other Abbots to combine the contemplative and apostolic ideals followed. Pfanner himself believed almost to the last that they could be combined—that to be a good missionary, in fact, one must be a good monk—but the

monastery he founded was separated by decree from the Order of the Trappists in 1909 (the year of his death), and became, eventually, the Congregation of Mariannhill Missionaries.

"When, then, the text of 'The Humanities in Africa' refers to Sister Bridget as a 'medical missionary' and 'Mariannhill' as a 'station' (even in the heyday of the missions, Mariannhill was never a station but the motherhouse), these casual references suppress, however unintentionally, however much with another project altogether in mind, a whole series of micronarratives in the history of colonialism that could in themselves do much to unsettle the rapidly sedimenting grand narratives of decolonisation. And while Sister Bridget—or, more appropriately now, *Blanche*, as Elizabeth ever more insistently falls back on calling her—invokes what we are meant to see as a crucially flawed grand narrative for 'the humanities in Africa', it is rather alarming that the local, the specific, the *human* story that is meant to modify at least, if not counter in some binary way, her story, is not drawn from something closer to hand, something more material, more intimate for Mariannhill.

"Perhaps I am beginning to carp now, and I know I am not being fair at all to the project that *Elizabeth Costello* represents, but I do this out of respect for the welter of stories that tumble out of a situated, specific sense of Mariannhill. The absence of the giant figure—in all senses of that word—of Pfanner alone reduces the mission work of Mariannhill to a given of postcolonial historiography, blurring it into the tropes attendant upon Protestant mission activity which seem so to inform Sister Bridget's missionary attitudes and erasing even further the desperately under-researched Catholic—let alone Trappist—approaches to apostolic work in the colonies. Telling idiosyncrasies thus simply disappear. Even the hospital that Sister Bridget administers was only able to come into being (under the pressure of the 'Spanish Influenza' epidemic of 1918) once the influence of Pfanner's attitudes to medical treatment had begun to wane.

"And what of the celebrated A.T. Bryant, who came to South Africa to join the community of Mariannhill? Amongst the most fervent of the missionaries, he refused to complete his novitiate (this had been shortened so that he could work as a teacher and missionary) when ordered to do so by the Visitor. He left Mariannhill and offered himself as a Familiar to the Oblates on the Bluff, eventually being transferred to Zululand where he could indulge himself to the full in studying and writing about the Zulu 'before the white man came'. The lost irony of this pre-eminent spokesperson for the history and the language of the Zulus having begun his religious life as an observer of silence flattens out into a far more direct

and brutal act of silencing when it is extended, as it should be, to include the story of Father Edward Muller Kece Mnganga. He was the first black priest—secular priest, note, and assistant priest only at that; no blacks were allowed to enter the monastery for many more years—to emerge from Mariannhill. After being trained and ordained in Rome, Mnganga was sent to join Bryant at Ebuhleni. Bryant's claims to a superior knowledge of the Zulu and constant interference with Mnganga's educational and mission work led to a physical altercation, the result of which was that Mnganga was placed in a government asylum in Pietermaritzburg. There he was quickly found not to be mentally deranged, but he refused to leave until the 'men who put him there'—the Bishop and Bryant—came to collect him. He was to wait for the next seventeen years.⁷

"And then there are the stories associated with Mariannhill that Coetzee does, briefly and obliquely, touch upon. The 'retired' and disabled sculptor, Joseph, whose endlessly and exactly repeated 'Gothic' images of Christ crucified become the focus of Elizabeth's argument with her sister over the proper models for African art and life, could have been modelled on any one of the black artists connected with the Studio of Liturgical Art set up by Sister Pientia Selhorst at Mariannhill in the early 1950s. (One of the sculptors there was in fact named Joseph, Joseph Dhlamini.) Features of 'Joseph's' work as presented by Coetzee, however, echo the work of the most famous of these artists, Ruben Xulu, although Xulu did go on both to vary his style and subject-matter, and to exhibit his carvings. He lived on various Catholic missions, visiting and working at Mariannhill quite regularly until, in 1985, his throat was slashed and his stomach ripped open by an unknown assailant who left him to bleed to death on the monastery grounds.

"Xulu had been, what is more, traumatised by some mysterious event when he was seven years old which resulted in the life-long loss of his hearing and impaired his ability to speak so he was unable even to cry out for help at the time of the attack⁸—figure enough, one would think, figure 'embedded' in the physical, the historical, for the suffering that Sister Bridget says the Zulus look for in "their gospel, their Christ" (2003:144).

"From the patronising heights of this reminder to Elizabeth, she goes on to pronounce that "ordinary people do not want the Greeks. They do not want the realm of pure forms" (144). Again, one is tempted to say, indeed: and what else but the most rarefied of forms is your sweep through the history of the humanities?

"This, in effect, is precisely what Elizabeth Costello goes on to do in the letter to Blanche that makes up much of Part IX of the version of 'The

Humanities in Africa' included in the novel (Part VI in the version published in *The Best Australian Stories* 2002). The 'story' (2004:148) she tells there of baring her breasts to the aged and ill Mr Phillips makes the point that, 'In all our talk about humanism and the humanities there was one word we both skirted: *humanity*' (150). Out of her realisation that the pose she has adopted in her modelling for his painting is derived '*From the Greeks... from the Greeks and from what the generations of Renaissance painters made of the Greeks*' (149) comes Elizabeth's rejoinder to her sister's last words to her on her South African visit: 'The humanities teach us humanity.... That is what you forgot to say. That is what the Greeks teach us, Blanche, the right Greeks. Think about it' (151).

It is this understanding that gives a much heavier ironic weight than is apparent at the time to the only response Elizabeth is capable of making as she parts from her sister: "'So: Thou hast triumphed again, O pale Galilean'" (2003:145). This irony (not given anything like its full dimensions in the version of 'The Humanities in Africa' that does not include the Australian section) entirely undercuts any sense of Sister Bridget having, as Attwell and others would have it, the 'last word'⁹—so much so that we are also made aware just how much Sister Bridget, despite the undoubted forcefulness of character granted to her, joins the rather thin and limited array of interlocutors set up to keep in play, technically at least, the various positions adopted by Costello in the different Lessons. Too perfunctory to perform this function in a serious fictional sense, they all take on some of the unconvincing character of Sister Bridget's wave.

"To suggest that it would have been more appropriate to look for a response in the physical, historical 'embeddedness' of Ruben Xulu, say—one silenced artist speaking, as it were, to another, as Mr Phillips's laryngectomy calls up through sheer contingency Xulu's vocal impairment and its place in the violence of his end—is to force the point beyond any reasonable application. But the lingering nature of this entirely accidental conjuncture between the local archive and the fictional project does bring home the degree to which it is left to Costello *herself* to convince us of the positions she adopts in the 'Lessons', rather than Costello as a character engaging meaningfully (not so much in the 'realistic' sense set up for dismissal from the first, but in an 'embedded' way) with other characters or the particular settings the novel invokes.

"And so we must turn our attention from Sister Bridget's last word and its supporting gesture to the position taken by Elizabeth in this Lesson. Is this, we must ask, more compelling when it comes to the issue of the nature and status of the Humanities in Africa?

"In attempting to answer this, we must acknowledge that the rather neat rejoinder in Elizabeth's letter is, quite properly, not the end of the story. It is troubled further by 'what she does not write, what she has no intention of writing', that is, 'how the story proceeds' (2004:151). The more overt conjunction of death and sexuality that follows her posing for Mr Phillips carries Elizabeth from humanity to *eros*, *agape*, even *caritas*, but these too are left hanging as questions as she passes beyond any neat conclusion at all to the question of why she cannot write of this incident, and the question behind that:

Blanche, dear Blanche, she thinks, why is there this bar between us? Why can we not speak to each other straight and bare, as people ought who are on the brink of passing? ... Sister of my youth, do not die in a foreign field and leave me without an answer! (155)

"The end of the story, then, and the conclusion to 'Lesson 5: The Humanities in Africa', is a question, not so much an open question as an unanswered question. Left to thought, un-communicated, the question takes us beyond the Humanities, Africa, the Humanities in Africa, the Humanities in Australia too, for that matter; it directs us instead to the concluding Lesson (beyond which hovers, of course, a 'Postscript'), 'Lesson 8: At the Gate'.

"In this Lesson Elizabeth puts her primary conviction as a writer, the conviction—belief, if you will—that, as a writer, it 'is not her profession to believe, just to write' (2003:194). This (turning as it does on her argument regarding the frogs of the Dulgannon which we have touched upon already) we may be prepared to grant her—on the condition that she truly does *not* believe, truly '*maintain[s] beliefs only provisionally*' (195). What we cannot allow the author is carrying the game by a kind of self-emptying or (to stay with the Greeks) what Terry Eagleton called, when writing so long ago of some forms of deconstruction, *kenosis*: achieving victory, that is, by being the first to get rid of all one's cards and sitting with empty hands (1983:147).

"With this proviso in mind, let us take Coetzee too at face value—remembering how 'truth' is problematised in autobiography no less than (secular) confession by the double-bind of questions of self-deception and the problem of closure (1992:252)—when he says, 'my difficulty is precisely with the project of stating positions, taking positions' (205). Let us take seriously the formal devices by which he seeks to achieve, as he sees Erasmus doing in *The Praise of Folly*, 'a position not simply impartial between ... rivals but also, by self-definition, off the stage of rivalry

altogether, a *nonposition*' (1996:84, his emphasis).

"In order to do so we must follow, as Coetzee does, the direction Foucault is forced to take in the face of Derrida's challenges to his 'archaeology of silence' in *Madness and Civilization* (1967:x). In response to Derrida's observation that the discourse of an archaeology of madness can only belong to reason, just as its investigation is dependent upon the very judicial record that denounces madness, Foucault concedes that 'the philosopher trying to enter madness *inside* of thought can do so only as a fictional project'. As to the next question, 'would such a fiction lie inside of philosophy?' (1996:87), we must surely follow, as does Coetzee in his essay, 'Erasmus: Madness and Rivalry', Shoshana Felman when she states,

in the play of forces underlying the relationship between philosophy and fiction, literature and madness, the crucial problem is that of the subject's place, of his position with respect to the delusion. And the position of the subject is not defined by what he says, nor by what he talks about, but by the place—unknown to him—from which he speaks. (1985:50; cited in Coetzee 1996:87)

"The implication here—no, the *demand*—is, that the strategy of fiction in such a project truly undermines any sense of the place or position of its author; in short, that there is something excessive to it beyond any neat critical formulation that may explain it as a strategy, anymore than the place—or, rather, *nonplace*¹⁰—from which it is generated may be explained from somewhere outside, beyond that place.

"Any suspicion—and I believe it is this suspicion that lies behind the more sceptical responses to both Coetzee's fictionalised 'autobiographies' and *Elizabeth Costello*—that this nonpositioning is too canny, too sure of its own uncertainty, undercuts the whole enterprise.

"It is this suspicion that informs Peter Singer's contribution to the 'Reflections' included in *The Lives of Animals*. The animal-rights philosopher concludes a fictionally re-created exchange with his daughter regarding the weakness of many of Coetzee's arguments with the words,

'But *are* they Coetzee's arguments? That's just the point – that's why I don't know how to go about responding to this so-called lecture. They are *Costello's* arguments. Coetzee's fictional device enables him to distance himself from them. And he has this character, Norma, Costello's daughter-in-law, who makes all the obvious objections to what Coetzee is saying. It's a marvellous device, really. Costello can blithely criticize

the use of reason, or the need to have any clear principles or proscriptions, without Coetzee really committing himself to these claims. Maybe he really shares Norma's very proper doubts about them. Coetzee doesn't even have to worry too much about getting the structure of the lecture right. When he notices that it is starting to ramble, he just has Norma say that Costello is rambling.' (1999:91)

"To this his daughter replies: "Pretty tricky. Not an easy thing to reply to. But why don't you try the same trick in response?". It is largely Singer's lack of skill as a writer of fiction that prevents us from entering the truly vertiginous zones of Coetzee when he in turn responds, 'Me? When have I ever written fiction?' The device is too obvious and not nearly well turned enough as a closing strategy to keep the game in play.

"But it does prepare us for the final move necessary for this presentation. This is to say that the issue is really not how Coetzee is positioned in relation to these texts, but how the reader is positioned by them. I have tried to speak to an instant in *Elizabeth Costello* when at least one small, highly circumscribed group of readers is disqualified from participating in the text's negotiations with its referents, and I have tried to suggest possible stories emanating from the historicity of Coetzee's imagined setting in 'The Humanities in Africa' that would, in another, hypothetical, fictional project, give back the kind of discursive materiality lost in that instant.

"I have done this, I repeat, not as a referential corrective of some sort, or as an exercise in historicism, materialism, or any of their varied combinations, but with a view to testing the effects of a particular kind of fictional approach against a specific sense of audience. I take Attwell's point when, commenting on the kind of 'embeddedness' Costello has in mind in her reference to 'Kafka's ape', he writes,

Costello shifts attention here from the relation between the word and the world—the traditional emphasis in debates about reference—to the relation between the self and the word. She argues, in effect, that while we may have given up on realism's illusionism, this does not mean the end of desire. She argues that we are invested in the acts of apprehension which carry that desire and connect us to the being of others. Costello—and at this point, I would argue, we could add Coetzee—shifts the debate about reference from the heuristic and phenomenological to the ontological and ethical. (2002:20),

but I am left to wonder about both the ontology and the ethics of a mode of writing that excludes, at a particular moment, the investment of a specific

section of the community of its readership.

"As for the 'fictional project' behind that reference (understood now as an 'investment in an act of apprehension', a 'desire that connects us')—well, upon what grounds other than those of fictionalising oneself into being does a reader ever engage with... a text, I nearly said. Yet surely the heartfelt centre of *Elizabeth Costello* is to remind us that a sympathetic imagining—'embodiment', fullness, the sensation of being—is necessary for, vital to, the understanding of panthers, sheep, and frogs, and every sort of otherness. Every sort of otherness including, as Sister Bridget's wave does not, the actual life erupting in those hills, so far from being barren, surrounding Mariannhill. For it is the richness and complexity of that life, finally, that counters the grand generalisations of her gesture rather than the more-or-less pat individualised response (all the more pat for remaining within her sister's terms) that Elizabeth belatedly includes in her letter. More importantly, it is that life—that life that 'exists whether or not I tell you about [it], whether or not I believe in [it]'—that sustains Elizabeth's much more heart-felt nonpositioning, that gives her 'the place—unknown to [her]—from which [she] speaks.'

"As for that most tenuous of lines intersecting this place, that line between speaking of and for so deftly dealt with throughout Coetzee's oeuvre, well, that is another question for another occasion. For the moment we can leave it, I think, to the form it took in the history of Mariannhill—with its past restored through the recovery of its 'n'—which, oddly enough, echoes Elizabeth Costello's difficulties with the writing of the consistently silent Paul West. The Trappists, writes Father Francis Schimlek of the Congregation of Mariannhill Missionaries, 'with St Paul, maintained that in a pagan community things were happening of which a good Christian best know nothing, speak nothing, and still less have them printed on paper for everybody to read.... Let the dead bury their dead, and be done with this problem. *Vanitas vanitatum*—"Our duty is to preach the Gospel of Christ," they said, "and not to investigate the convictions and practices of witchdoctors and their followers. It is hard enough as it is"' (1950:11-12).

"Hard enough, indeed. Still, to such, be they contemplative monks in their closed community lost in prayer for the world outside or writers at their desks struggling to find the appropriate form for the one specific, indifferent detail in which they can believe, precisely because it does not believe in them, let us commend the hills of Mariannhill.

"Thank you."

Notes

1. Primarily to remind us, I suppose, that the author is one of the key effects generated by his or her fiction.
2. Paul Rich is not alone in identifying "a partial restoration to the romance mode through the idiom of literary post-modernism" (1984:133), although he is amongst the very few to have traced this romantic strain in South African fiction—the critical evaluation of which certainly has been, as he puts it, "mainly dictated by the norms of literary realism" (1984:120).
3. Jane Poyner (2003), for example—the only other critic I have read so far to have noticed the change of spelling—is only prepared to allow that "Coetzee (perhaps deliberately) misspells Mariannahill".
4. St Mary's Hospital Website: <http://www.stmarys.co.za/>
5. Information obtained in an interview with Sister Regina Bachmann in November 2004.
6. See Sr. M. Annette Buschgerd, *For A Great Price: The Story of the Missionary Sisters of the Precious Blood* (Reimlingen: Mariannahill Mission Press, 1990).
7. All the official histories of Mariannahill circumvent Mnganga's story in one way or another. Something approaching the full account only emerges from the oral sources used by George Sombe Mukuka for his D.Phil. dissertation, "The Establishment of the Black Catholic Clergy in South Africa from 1887 to 1957". See pp.142-64 and Appendices.
8. See Cormick (1993:11-21).
9. See Attwell (2002:23). This paper was first presented in the same year that *The Best Australian Stories* was released, a year before *Elizabeth Costello* was published; Attwell would thus have been working with the version published in *The Humanities in Africa/Die Geisteswissenschaften in Afrika*. Anton van der Hoven's reading—"Coetzee chooses to end the story with Sister Bridget pointedly, even obsessively, hammering home her belief that her sister Elizabeth is mistaken" (2003:95)—is cut short in much the same way, if to different effect.
10. Not to be blurred into a Utopian position.

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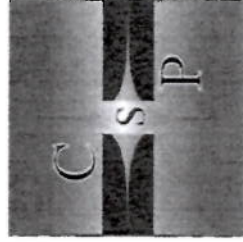
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POSTCOLONIALISM:
SOUTH/AFRICAN PERSPECTIVES

Edited by

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Postcolonialism: South/African Perspectives, Edited by Michael Chapman

This book first published 2008 by

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

15 Angerton Gardens, Newcastle, NE5 2JA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-84718-599-1, ISBN (13): 9781847185990

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